

THE COMPASS
Breaking the Rules
Untidy Christianity, Part 6

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May I just say, I am really enjoying serving as teaching pastor for The Compass, and I'm especially enjoying serving under the leadership of David G. Brown.

But sometimes he scares me.

When God first inspired him with the vision for this fellowship, The Compass, David tried to describe it to me, and this is one of the phrases he used:

"No rules."

What? You can't mean "no rules." You have to mean "not very many rules." You HAVE to have rules; how does an organization function without rules?

But David kept saying "No rules."

And over time, this concept got out of hand.

You look on our website, www.compassfellowship.org, click on the "About" button, and choose "Vision."

There it is in writing:

"...Everyone is on a journey. Compass wants to come alongside and help you with yours. No rules. No checkboxes. Just love. We are in this together."

This does not seem feasible, to tell you the truth.

There have to be SOME checkboxes. SOME rules.

Don't we have to construct our faith, our walk with God, our ministry here at The Compass, around some list of do's and don'ts?

It could be a short list! It could be all easy things!

This was just my instinctive response to David G. Brown's crazy idea that we would have a ministry with no rules.

Because I grew up in a world FULL of rules.

The big idea for me, in my religious upbringing, was that there were no-no's, and you didn't do them.

And anybody who was crazy enough to do-do a no-no was done-done.

They were not one of us. They were tainted. And they just might taint us, so keep your distance.

This was not a big loud process of embarrassing people who did no-no's.

It was a quiet, subtle, often whispered-about process.

But it was very real — and it was very effective.

You knew who was in and who was out. You could keep score. You could track people's spirituality: "What? Paulie Van Scoyk played poker on Saturday night? Backslider Alert! Danger, Will Robinson!"

But now I was going to have to serve as teaching pastor for this new cult — er, I mean fellowship — and I needed to know the truth about rules.

If I was going to have to stand in front of a group of people and dare to speak for God, I

wanted to be sure I had the God's-eye view on this subject. I wanted to know how people have set up rules and lived with rules down through history, and what God thought about them when they busted the rules.

Well, fortunately, I own a time machine.

So I started up my time machine, and I went back in time about 3,500 years——

Yes, I have a time machine.

Some of you are saying "He thinks David G. Brown is scary? This guy is a nut case!"

No, my time machine is right here — it's disguised as a book with about 1,300 pages, printed on real thin paper with a black leather cover.

I let God take me on an incredible journey back through time — kind of a Living History of Rule-Breaking — and by the time I got back home to the year 2004, I had a more complete picture of what God really thinks about the rules we live by.

This evening, I'd like to take you on the same journey.

Actually, we can just go through my captain's log, that'll be quicker.

First, we'll go back in time about 3,500 years, to 1491 B.C.

We'll steer our time machine over to the Middle East, to the very northeastern corner of Africa; on a map it looks like a long thumbnail of land between Egypt and Israel. It's called the Sinai Peninsula, and out in the middle of it, we land on Mount Sinai.

Here we find the great patriarch of the Israelite people, Moses, alone with God on the top of this mountain.

This was no easy climb for Moses. Sinai is a 7,498-foot peak.

If we abandoned our time machine and just got on an airplane and flew over there today, we would find that some clever entrepreneurs have installed nearly 4,000 steps up the side of the mountain — so it only takes about 3 hours to climb to the top.

But Moses got himself all the way up there without the Department of Tourism, and God met him up there; and God talked, and Moses took dictation.

Among other things, God gave Moses what we've come to call the Ten Commandments.

And one of the Ten Commandments — the fourth one, to be exact — went like this:

Exodus 20:

8 Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.

11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

I'm pointing out this commandment because in my time travels, I found that this rule is going to come up in conversations later.

But the Ten Commandments isn't the only dictation Moses took from God up there on

Mount Sinai.

He also got instructions for setting up a tabernacle, or a “tent of meeting,” where God would actually do his interacting with the nation’s leaders.

We can actually read these instructions in our own Bibles today; there are pages and pages of detailed instructions for this facility, and for the activities that will be conducted in the facility.

And some details of these rules are going to come up in conversation too, so let’s tune in our time machine to the moment when Moses is laying out these specific instructions:

Exodus 29:

32 At the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, Aaron and his sons [these were the top-ranked religious leaders in the country] **are to eat the meat of the ram and the bread that is in the basket.** [He’s referring to some of the ritual sacrifices that he has already described.]

33 They are to eat these offerings by which atonement was made for their ordination and consecration. But no one else may eat them, because they are sacred.

34 And if any of the meat of the ordination ram or any bread is left over till morning, burn it up. It must not be eaten, because it is sacred.

And elsewhere, in fact, he gives instructions about how you can’t have sexual relations for a certain amount of time prior to going through these rituals.

These were all symbolic procedures and requirements that God wanted his people to observe in order to remind themselves of their relationship with him.

And at one other point in time — about 39 years later — Moses gets another batch of instructions, which show up in our Bibles in **Numbers 28:9**; and there it says, essentially,

Even though you’re not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath, according to that OTHER rule back in Exodus 29,

the priests DO need to do some work, because they’ve got to mix up this special sacrificial offering, with two lambs of a certain age, and certain fractional amounts of flour and oil —

the recipe is right there in your Bible.

So there’s a rule, and there’s a rule about how to do the rule, and there’s a rule about how some people have to break the rule in order to do the rule.

Okay! Now let’s store everything we’ve gotten from Moses in our mental databank, get back in our time machine, and fast-forward in time about 400 years, to 1062 B.C., and let’s aim a couple hundred miles north and east to a place called Nob, just a mile north of Jerusalem...

Here we find ourselves back in familiar territory; we’re back in the life and times of David, the guy whose journey we’ve been tracking for the past six weeks.

What is going on with David this evening?

Well, we’ve already seen in our studies how David fell out of favor with King Saul, how the king put a contract out on him, and now David is a fugitive, sneaking around

from place to place, just trying to stay alive. But our time machine has brought us to an exact moment in David's life when the rules that Moses set up, 400 years earlier, are creating a serious problem:

1 Samuel 21:

1 David went to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he met him, and asked, "Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?"

Nob was the little village that the priests had set up for themselves as a place to do all the rituals and ceremonies that were required under the religious rules and regulations that Moses had set up 400 years earlier. These guys are passionate about following the rules; they are still at it after four centuries.

But Ahimelech is really nervous, maybe because David is technically an outlaw, or maybe because it's so out of the ordinary for someone of his stature to travel alone.

Either way, to Ahimelech, this just smells like trouble.

But David has a serious problem. He is hungry. Really hungry. He's got to get something to eat. And the guys in his little band of fellow-fugitives are starving too.

Whatever else happens, he absolutely doesn't want Ahimelech to send him away empty-handed.

So David takes a fascinating approach: he lies. He just lies to the priest!

2 David answered Ahimelech the priest, "The king charged me with a certain matter [Uh, yeah! That's the ticket!] and said to me, 'No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.' [Yeah, that's it!] As for my men, I have told them to meet me at [uh, uh...] a certain place. [Yeah, right!]

(Maybe you think I'm kidding, but if you study the original language of the text, he's actually using the old Hebrew equivalent of weasel words, big-time. "A certain place," for example, might be more accurately translated "such-and-such a place.")

3 Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find."

4 But the priest answered David, "I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here — provided the men have kept themselves from women."

See, it's a good thing we made that first stop in the time machine — because Ahimelech is referencing the rules and regulations that God gave to Moses 400 years earlier.

5 David replied, "Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men's things are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!"

It's like a football team leaving their wives at home the night before a game.

So now Ahimelech has a decision to make. On the one hand, he's got these rules. On the other hand, he's got David.

These are good guys, they're on the run, they're in trouble, they're hungry — but he's

got nothing to give them except the bread that's supposed to be off-limits. So Ahimelech makes a judgment call. He lets David and his guys eat the consecrated bread.

6 So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the Lord and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away.

Okay, everybody back in the time machine. Let's store the dialogue between David and Ahimelech in our databanks, we're gonna need it in a couple minutes — store it alongside the stuff we got from Moses, and let's jet forward in time about 280 years, to 780 B.C.

We need to go further north, up to somewhere in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Here we find a prophet named Hosea — and Hosea really has a handle on this rule-breaking guilt-and-innocence thing, because first God instructed him to marry a woman who proceeded to cheat on him, and then God instructed him to take her back, and write about it, and use Hosea's forgiveness of his adulterous wife as an illustration of God's endless love for people.

I can just hear Hosea saying, "Thanks a lot, God! Nice assignment!"

But God used Hosea powerfully to call the nation of Israel to repentance and a new relationship with God.

And one of the lines in Hosea's book is a line that's going to be repeated in another conversation that we're going to eavesdrop on in a just a minute or two:

Hosea 6:6

For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

Okay, let's store this in our databanks too, get back in the time machine — (anybody got any Dramamine on you?) — and let's track down Jesus.

We'll go 780 years forward in time, to the first century A.D.; it's a beautiful Saturday afternoon in the Holy Land.

We'll aim for the northernmost province of Israel, known as Galilee.

I would say this time machine was worth the investment, because it is so right-on-target every single time. Look, we've landed exactly in Matthew 12:1-14.

Matthew 12:1-14:

1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. [That's Saturday.] **His disciples** [his 12 best friends, who traveled with him throughout his earthly ministry] **were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.**

Now they weren't stealing; this was the accepted custom of the day.

You didn't hop into your Toyota and head down the road; you walked.

And you didn't stop off at McDonald's for a Big Mac or at a convenience store for a box

of Hoho's.

If you walked along the edge of a farmer's grain field in those days, you, you were free to take some of the grain as you went.

But...

2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

Now the Pharisees were the most religious people in those days.

They were into holiness.

They wanted to really, really love God, and they wanted to show it.

And not only that, but they wanted everybody else to really, really love God.

So what were they complaining to Jesus about?

They were upset because they felt that the disciples were busting that fourth bullet point in the Ten Commandments that we looked at earlier; they weren't "keeping the Sabbath."

But does Jesus respond by saying "Oops! Sorry! We'll stop. Won't do it again"?

No. He actually responds with a question.

And to us, it might seem like a pretty strange question — if we hadn't taken our time travels this evening:

Matthew 12:

3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"

4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread — which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.

Now the Pharisees knew what Jesus was talking about. They did not need a time machine, because everybody back then knew the Old Testament.

You know, today practically anybody could have a conversation and make references to George W. Bush or Britney Spears or *Survivor* and people would know what you were talking about.

Back then, you would reference a passage from Hosea or Malachi or Deuteronomy, in the Old Testament, and people would know what you were talking about.

So when Jesus talked about David and the consecrated bread, the Pharisees knew instantly what he was talking about.

Furthermore, the Pharisees acknowledged that David was the greatest king Israel ever had — but here, he had done a no-no.

Jesus is saying to the Pharisees: Hey, wait a minute. You're beating up on us for eating a few grains of totally legal wheat on the Sabbath when we're hungry, when your great historical hero David ate the totally ILLEGAL consecrated bread when HE was hungry — and God went ahead and let HIM become KING!

And then Jesus goes on to say to the Pharisees:

Matthew 12:

5 Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple

**desecrate the day and yet are innocent?
6 I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.**

He's talking about that rule in the book of Numbers — the one that says you have to break the rule in order to obey the rule.
So Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, Hey, even the religious leaders don't follow the letter of the law — and I outrank them!

And finally Jesus takes one more shot at these religious leaders.

He says in

Matthew 12:7

**If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'
you would not have condemned the innocent.**

What's he talking about here? He's quoting the prophet Hosea, which is a book of the Old Testament that these Pharisees knew intimately.

Jesus is saying, You may have your Old Testament memorized, boys, but you don't seem to get the meanings.

You don't seem to be living in the spirit of it.

God says he's more interested in your being merciful than in your following all the details of the religious rules and regulations.

But you're very UNmercifully beating up on my friends here for munching a few sunflower seeds on a walk down the road, just because it doesn't squeeze into your view of how to follow the religious rules.

As F.F. Bruce writes in his book *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, "Human need takes priority over ceremonial law."

And then — you know we find another account of this same encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees over in the book of Mark.

And at this point in the conversation, Mark offers one more little detail of the dialogue:

Mark 2:27

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Now on the one hand, yes, Jesus is dealing with one specific aspect of God's design: the concept of the Sabbath.

God designed us to work hard, play hard, enjoy life, be productive, feel fulfilled — for about 6 days; and then — take a day off.

Rest, reflect, get back in touch with our spiritual self, remind ourselves where we came from, remember that we're not accomplishing all this stuff under our own power, get re-connected to God in whatever ways we've gotten disconnected during the previous 6 days.

The Jews observed the Sabbath on what we call Saturday.

Christians have traditionally observed something like the Sabbath, a day of rest, a holy day, whatever you want to call it, on Sunday.

But people of the Adventist faith are Christian, yet they observe the Sabbath on

Saturday.

Which day of the week you take your rest isn't really the most critical detail.

My Sabbath is really Saturday, because in our family we try to hold Saturdays apart as a day of rest; we call it the "don't have to do anything" day.

As much as possible, we try to just play on Saturdays. Just relax. Recharge our batteries.

When I don't get that one day a week off, I really feel it.

God designed us ideally to take a day off each week.

God says, "Take a break."

It's for our own good.

So Jesus says to the Pharisees in Mark 2:27: Hey, look, the Sabbath was designed for the benefit of people.

People weren't created for the purpose of satisfying the Sabbath law.

But this principle goes beyond the Sabbath concept; it's true in every area of God's design for our lives.

God didn't invent this complicated system of life and then say, "Now, who can I torture with this system? I know! I'll create people, and force them into this difficult grid."

No — he got this idea, to create people, and he loved this idea.

He loved us — and he wanted to give us every opportunity to experience life fully.

God designed us perfectly.

And he reveals to us the elements of his design so we can live at our full potential.

See, we think in terms of rules; he thinks in terms of relationship.

We see them as rules to be broken; he sees them as guides to be entered into.

We think of sin as something God won't let us do or he gets angry; he thinks of sin as something that shortchanges us, and that breaks his heart.

But the Pharisees aren't done with this issue, and neither is Jesus.

Matthew 12:

9 Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue,

10 and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

[They're saying, Healing is work! Working on the Sabbath is a no-no!]

11 He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"

12 How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

13 Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

The religious leaders had made their church a rule-following place.

Jesus wanted it to be a love-sharing community.

So to demonstrate, he marched into their church — and broke one of their rules — and

did something helpful and loving.

The religious people had started out wanting nothing but to love God. But along the way, without even realizing — because they saw God’s design as a bunch of rules to be broken, because they saw sin as stuff God doesn’t want you to do or he gets angry, instead of stuff that shortchanges us, which breaks God’s heart — their spiritual situation shifted right under their feet. They lost the heart of their faith; they lost their love for people. They got more caught up in their religious rules and regulations than they did in the redemptive potential of people who are God’s favorite thing in the universe!

And I’m sorry to say, as early as this conversation was in Jesus’ ministry — some scholars think it even happened before the Sermon on the Mount, which was way early — if we go all the way over in Matthew 22, almost at the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry (I don’t think we need the time machine for this one; it’s just a three-year jump) — we find that people are still bumping up against this concept, and they still don’t get it.

In Matthew 22:36-39, Jesus gets nailed by a seriously skeptical seminary professor with the question:

Matthew 22:

36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’

38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

God says, “I love you; love me back.

And the best way to love me is to love the people around you.

If there’s something helpful or constructive you can do for someone, do it.

Don’t look for an excuse not to.”

But here’s the hard reality; here’s the ugly truth:

If we’re going to be happier loving God by loving each other, then what is Satan going to dedicate himself to?

He’s going to dedicate himself to convincing us NOT to love each other — for whatever reason.

And what will be the cleverest reason he can use to deceive us into not loving each other?

The cleverest reasons he can use to deceive us into not loving each other will be the seemingly good reasons, the seemingly sensible reasons, the seemingly RIGHTEOUS reasons.

The religious reasons.

We embrace a negative view of a person or situation, and justify it to ourselves as the VIRTUOUS view.

My college professor Dr. Neil Eskelin wrote a book called *Yes-Yes Living in a No-No*

World.

Sure, the devil has made this a no-no world — but Christ calls us to yes-yes living in the midst of it all.

* * *

Get in the time machine one more time with me.
Let's see where we land.

Well! Here we are, at 4047 East Whitney Lane, February 2004.

It's time to ask ourselves the killer question:

In the Matthew 12 grain field of my own life, am I a disciple? or a Pharisee?

Am I embracing people, drawing them in, loving them by the power of Christ within me?

Or am I pushing people away, sealing myself off, keeping people at a distance — and giving myself some religious-type rationalization for why it's okay?

If I have adopted any belief or value that leads me to keep people at a distance, or break off relationships, or separate myself from others — even if it seems to have come from a good or sensible source — that belief or value should be questioned.

And what questions should I be asking?

Well, whenever I find myself having a negative reaction to a person or situation, I probably need to do kind of a Yes-Yes Living quiz on myself — ask myself 3 questions.

And while we're at it, we can go back to King David for some answers.

The longest song he ever wrote was Psalm 199, and it's full of insight into yes-yes living.

* Does this impulse come from God?

Psalm 119:105 Your word [not somebody else's] is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Psalm 119:114 You [not someone else] are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.

* Is this truly part of God's ideal design for me?

Psalm 119:68 You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.

Psalm 119:50 ...Your promise preserves my life.

Psalm 119:137 Righteous are you, O Lord, and your laws are right.

* Will my life be more fulfilling because of this?

Psalm 119:35 Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

If I'm angry, if I'm nervous, if I'm scared — if I'm not experiencing the peace that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7) — that's a clue that I'm missing out on yes-yes living.

But the good news is, God isn't finished with me.
I can go back to him at any time and say, Start me over. Grow me. Push me past the
no-no impulses, into the fullness of what you have for me!